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ANBAR AFTER ISIS

Building Long-Term Stability in Western Iraq.

BY LIEUTENANT COMMANDER
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"My duties were simple; I was to encourage the local inhabitants to stand up for themselves."

— Former British Officer & Ambassador Alec Kirkbride⁰¹

The tribes and tribal leaders of Anbar Province are facing a future of uncertain options. It is clear the military momentum of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria has been arrested and the threat from ISIS has largely receded, even though it still remains. Additionally, as the Iraqi Government moves forward with reconstruction in liberated areas, a deep mistrust exists between Anbar residents and their central government that can only be bridged with political reconciliation and a long-term stability plan.

The legacy of tribal cooperation with ISIS, either through action or inaction, and the remaining misgivings of the central government toward Anbar leaders in particular mean liberation from ISIS may not mean liberation from misrule in Baghdad. Even though many tribes were unable to resist the military offensive of ISIS in 2014-

2015 due to the crumbling of the Iraqi Army, inadequate equipment, and poor leadership, the perception continues to exist in the minds of many central government leaders that the Sunni Arab community joined with ISIS and cannot be trusted. Against this backdrop is a struggle within Anbar over political leadership of the province pitting some tribal leaders against more technocratic officials who do not want to see a return to power of the tribes as had taken place during the Anbar Awakening.⁰² The successful mobilization of Anbar's tribes during the Awakening period from 2005-2008 took place under the auspices of robust U.S. military, political, and diplomatic leadership wherein the United States became political advocates of the interests of the Sunni Arab community to the central government.⁰³ Absent this same U.S. presence today, Sunni Arab tribal leaders are left to their own devices and, without an outside catalyst to unify them, they will likely continue to be weak and susceptible to political overtures from Islamists, sectarian interests, or outside groups. Past efforts by the tribes to organize politically on their own under the *Mutammar Sahwat al-Iraq* effort splintered due to tribal and personal rivalries.

A new approach should be considered that will not only mobilize the Sunni Arab tribal community in Anbar Province against ISIS but also seeks to facilitate a political rapprochement with the central government. However, before such an approach can be attempted, how ISIS forces seized Anbar Province must be better understood. The following are three vignettes of how ISIS seized the Anbar towns of Al-Qaim and Hit and attempted to take Haditha based upon interviews with tribal leaders conducted by U.S. Government officials.

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Iraqi Troops stand in formation in front of tribal leaders in Al-Asad circa 2014. U.S. ARMY PHOTO COURTESY OF 3RD SFG(A) PAO

AL-QAIM – DIVIDE AND CONQUER

It is unclear what role the residents of al-Qaim performed in protests against the rule of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Malik, from 2011-2014, but they likely sympathized with the broader Sunni Arab community's grievances against their mistreatment under the regime.⁰⁴ Unlike most other parts of Anbar Province, the district of al-Qaim was especially sensitive to events taking place in Syria during the Arab Spring. Not too long after Fallujah “fell” to ISIS militants in early 2014, the district of al-Qaim was quickly overwhelmed by military forces associated with the terrorist group on June 21, 2014. Much like their other military conquests, the success of ISIS was due to a variety of actions including using overwhelming conventional forces, a dispirited indigenous military, popular grievances amongst Sunni Arabs, and tribal rivalries. The central tribe which participated in the Anbar Awakening beginning in 2005, which served as the local partner to U.S. forces, was the Albu Mahal tribe. While other tribes in the region eventually participated in the Awakening, it was this particular tribe which first joined it and provided the effort's key leadership. When ISIS military forces arrived in the al-Qaim region, the Albu Mahal tribe fought them the most until they were forced to capitulate in mid-2014. The key tribal rivals of the Mahal, the Albu Karbali and the al-Salmani, joined forces with ISIS supplementing the terrorist group's forces with local volunteers. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria allowed members of both the Albu Karbali and the al-Salmani tribes to retain the weapons and vehicles they had taken from Albu Mahal as well as equipment that had been abandoned by Iraqi Security Forces. Historically, the Albu Mahal were the first to work with Coalition Forces early in the war around the 2004-2005 time-frame with the Karbali and Salmani eventually doing so in 2006-2007. Once ISIS consolidated its control of the area, significant Albu Mahal leaders fled the region while members of the Karbali and al-Salmani tribes became integral elements of the local ISIS governance and security structure.

HIT, OVERWHELM AND UNDERMINE

In the spring of 2014, the Hit police began receiving intelligence reports of terrorists living in the defunct railroad station west of town. After investigating the report they captured a laptop computer which contained detailed plans for an attack on Hit from three separate directions. These plans were passed to the Ministry of Interior but nothing was done to increase security or provide additional resources to go after the cell. During the summer, Hit began

to receive tens of thousands of internally displaced people (from the eastern Anbar areas of Fallujah and Ramadi who were fleeing ISIS attacks in those cities. Dozens of IDPs were actually ISIS supporters who were acting as sleeper agents reporting on Iraqi Security Forces/tribal fighters within Hit. On the night of Oct. 22, 2014, ISIS began its assault on the City of Hit from the north, west and south following the exact plan which had been previously discovered. Islamic State of Iraq and Syria fighters used the train tracks located on the west side of Hit to move fighters freely into the area. The attack was initiated by multiple assaults on check points in the northern sector of Hit in order to force ISF/tribal fighters to move to reinforce the northern area. Islamic State of Iraq and Syria fighters used two car bombs to attack the Hit Emergency Response Battalion Headquarters located south of the city at 6 a.m., followed by mortars and heavy machine guns. Sleeper cells within Hit then detonated improvised explosive devices throughout the area at various Albu Nimr Sheikhs' houses, checkpoints, and police stations to support the main attack. The IEDs were intended to scare the populace and force the ISF/Tribal fighters to corral their forces into one area so ISIS elements moving in could easily identify them.

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The Anbar Province in Iraq outlined in red. The article vignettes focus on how ISIS seized the Anbar towns of Al-Qaim and Hit and attempted to take Haditha based on interviews with tribal leaders.





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Traffic fills the market area of Haditha, Iraq.
U.S. MARINE CORPS
PHOTO BY SGT. CHAD L. SIMON

02
Iraqi troops stand in formation in Al-Asad circa 2014.

03
Iraqi tribal fighters conduct training. The tribes of Anbar successfully mobilized during the Anbar Awakening period to fight al-Qaeda militants.

U.S. ARMY PHOTOS
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Sleeper cells prepositioned snipers on roof tops throughout the city to target ISF leadership, create havoc, and maximize confusion among ISF/tribal fighters. Islamic State of Iraq and Syria's attack forced the ISF/tribal fighters to consolidate on the western side of the Euphrates River where ISIS then used heavy weapons to gain fire superiority and force the ISF/tribal fighters to retreat to the east of the river and then on to Barwana, Haditha. Upon entering the city, ISIS specifically recruited Hit civilians who had fought against Coalition Forces during Operation Iraqi Freedom and on November 21, 2014 they announced through local mosques that they would be conducting forced recruitment of civilians and sending them to fight outside of Hit. On October 4, 2015, seventy Albu Nimr tribesmen were killed by ISIS in Khanizir village and in early November 2014 they massacred upwards of 500 of the tribe's members with 200 bodies later found in a mass grave. In a recent interview a senior Albu Nimr Sheik named Nairn Al-Gaoud said the following about the situation, "ISIS is killing the Albu Nimr because back in the 2000s, in 2006, Albu Nimr was killing al-Qaeda and today Albu Nimr is killing ISIS. We were the first tribe to kill them. Many tribes also fought them, but we were the first ... ISIS, as you know, is an enemy of Islam. Any good man will kill them. Many tribes will fight ISIS and kill ISIS ... ISIS is inhuman."⁰⁵



HADITHA – A DETERMINED SIEGE

Military forces associated with the ISIS seized the towns of al-Qaim and Rawa northwest of Haditha on June 20, 2014, laid siege to Haditha, and then bypassed it to take the town of Hit on October 22, 2014. The town of Barwanah, south of Haditha, had originally fallen to ISIS forces but through a combination of Coalition assistance, the Iraqi Counterterrorism Service, the Iraqi Army, and local tribal and police forces they were able to retake the town on Sept. 7, 2014. Security operations in the area were coordinated through the Jazeera Badeya Operations Center at the Haditha Dam. In mid-November 2014, Haditha security forces reported more than 20 ISIS sleeper cells within the city of Haditha, the majority of which had entered the city by disguising themselves as IDPs from the greater Anbar Province. One member of the Haditha police department described the city as “an Island surrounded by Daesh.”⁰⁸ Efforts by ISIS to take the Haditha area usually involved attacks on multiple fronts utilizing suicide car and truck bomb attacks, indirect fire, and small arms fire. Initial food and medical shortages due to the siege were addressed by a local food distribution committee organizing humanitarian assistance for the local population as well as

IDPs. A local tribal leader provided some perspective on the ISIS siege:

“The tribes inside and around Haditha, including the Jughayfi tribe inside the city and the Albu Nimr tribe on the west bank of the Euphrates, will not surrender the city. Whatever the differences we have with the central government, which ignored the legitimate demands of the Iraqi people in the western [region] ... and allowed groups such as this [ISIS] to enter the country, we will not surrender.”⁰⁷

In early January 2016, ISIS forces launched a complex attack against Haditha from three different directions. The mayor of Haditha provided his perspective, “We have more than 20 martyrs and more than 50 wounded. They are from the army, counterterrorism service, the police and the tribal fighters ... Haditha was targeted Sunday by a massive offensive involving more than 40 vehicles, all armored and some explosives-laden ... They were destroyed by Coalition and Iraqi air strikes.”⁰⁸ During this same attack, ISIS was able to seize the village of Sakrana, where 20 car bombs were used, but it was eventually liberated by ISF several days later. However much tribal resiliency and geography played roles in Haditha’s ability to resist ISIS, locals also realized the importance of their location. Ibrahim al-Jughayfi, spokesman for the Haditha tribal fighters, provided this perspective, “Everyone agrees that there are two things that have helped us. The existence of the Haditha Dam and Ayn Al-Asad Airbase.”⁰⁹



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BUILDING AN ANBAR PEACE

Any effort to build better relations between the residents of Anbar Province and the Iraqi central government must be bold and imaginative, take into account how ISIS had seized power in Anbar, and understand the views of central government leaders with respect to their interest in creating stability in western Iraq. The following initiative is proposed to establish the desired effects in Anbar: (1) wholesale tribal rejection of ISIS, (2) a political rapprochement between the Iraqi central government and Anbar residents, and (3) build enduring stability in the region. It is based upon the concept that both sides to the agreement have rights and responsibilities and that building trust will only come about through a series of confidence-building measures. It is focused on concrete action and is not intended to spawn endless rounds of meetings with few results and an indefinite timeline for implementation.

“THE ANBAR AGREEMENT”

The process would begin with Anbar tribal leaders signing a comprehensive agreement calling upon their members to renounce ISIS and stating that they would punish those who support them (individual tribes have done this in the past such as the Haditha area tribes led

by the Jughayfi in April 2007). It would also call upon the tribes to reject those leaders who sided with ISIS and to select new ones untainted by association with the group. The tribal leaders would pledge their support to a unified Iraq based upon justice and equality and their support for a peaceful political process that dealt with all Iraqis fairly. In return for these pledges, the agreement would call upon the Iraqi Government to provide an expedited judicial process to determine the fate of tribal members who were found guilty of crimes against the state and to establish this process in Anbar Province. The agreement would also call upon the government to establish an office for a representative of the Prime Minister in Ramadi in order to build confidence between the tribes and the Prime Minister and to demonstrate that good-faith efforts are being undertaken to implement the agreement. It would call upon the government to embed CTS forces in each newly-liberated tribal area in order to build cross-tribal forces to provide continued security in tribal communities. These newly mobilized forces would be trained and overseen by members of the CTS. It would call for the creation of an independent board comprised of representatives of the tribes, the Prime Minister's office, prominent but independent Iraqis, and the United Nations to monitor the terms of the agreement and to advocate for its implementation with the Iraqi Central Government's bureaucracy and

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Iraqi tribal and military leaders in Anbar province work together to maintain stability in the region.

U.S. ARMY PHOTO
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tribes in the province. This same board would also advise the Prime Minister about tribal interests in Anbar and keep his office apprised of implementation. The key principles throughout the process are tribal balance and equality, justice and security (e.g. tribal bill of rights), and national cohesion. Funding for additional CTS forces, tribal mobilization billets, and increased judicial activity would be split between the Iraqi Government and Coalition Forces.

Tribal Perspective: There are five “fighting tribes” that central government leaders respect and trust in Anbar Province due to their willingness to fight ISIS, especially when it first arrived in force in the province: Albu Issa (Fallujah), Albu Nimr (Hit), al-Jughayfi (Haditha), al-Wani (Ramadi) and the Albu Mahal (al-Qaim). These tribes should be the primary leaders of an effort to reconcile Anbar’s tribes with the Iraqi Government. If the tribes are able to organize and propose an “Anbar Agreement,” they will see their political influence dramatically increase at the possible expense of more technocratic Sunni Arab leaders. It would allow tribal leaders to “clean house” within their tribes and position themselves as friends of the central government. The embedding of CTS forces in their communities would help these tribal leaders continue to remove ISIS forces within their community and the provision of employment through tribally-balanced local forces overseen by CTS would allow them to provide jobs to their supporters. Furthermore, among all of Iraq’s security forces, the tribes trust CTS the most. Additionally, calling for a unified Iraq pursuing change within peaceful political means also undercuts irredentist elements seeking to break up the Iraqi state using violence.

Iraqi Central Government Perspective: Seeing the tribes “spontaneously” reject ISIS and attempt to clean their own houses of the terrorist group will be well received and, frankly, unexpected. The calling for embedding CTS forces in newly liberated tribal areas will be welcomed as a check on the ability of these tribes to rise again against the central government. The commitment to raise local protective forces under the auspices of CTS will also give central Iraqi Government leaders encouragement that they will play an enduring role in shaping who participates in these forces in order to prevent a future rebellion. The call for judicial involvement and the tribes asking the central government to prosecute those tribal leaders who committed crimes against the state will also be well received as a sign that the tribes are owning up to their role in the rise of ISIS. The establishment of a regional office from the Prime Minister’s office

will be well received as a confidence-building measure and the creation of a “Peace Committee” to monitor and advocate for the implementation of the agreement and to keep key stakeholders informed would also be welcomed. It would be helpful to place the “Peace Committee” in Baghdad as a confidence-building measure and to facilitate its activities in Anbar. The pledge of Coalition Forces to partially fund both new CTS forces and tribal forces would also be welcomed by a government experiencing significant budgetary shortfalls.

CONCLUSION

It is not uncommon for political actors to resort to armed force and use leverage as a tool in political systems that are highly centralized but the population greatly desires decentralization (e.g. unitary state vs. a decentralized society). This is especially acute in situations such as Iraq where mistrust is rampant among the key political players, religious and ethnic grievances are strong, and there is a history of oppression. All of these factors, among others, shape decision-making in Iraq and continually lead to sub-optimal outcomes for all of those involved. The concepts contained within “The Anbar Agreement” seek to allay mistrust between the central Iraqi Government and Anbar tribal leaders by allowing each to build leverage on the other while building greater confidence between both that the motives of each are sincere. The province of Anbar has a special place in Iraqi history as being the first to comprehensively reject al-Qaeda and its enduring relationship with Coalition Forces is unique among Iraqi provinces. A test case of this sort of agreement could become a model for other Sunni Arab areas seeking to reject ISIS but also reform their relationship with the Iraqi Central Government. While this approach is unorthodox and would require not only resources and great dedication to its implementation, it also requires robust U.S. leadership to serve as an honest broker between the Iraqi Government, tribal leaders, and the international community. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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NOTES 01. Former British Officer & Ambassador Alec Kirkbride, *An Awakening: The Arab Campaign 1917-1918*, London: University Press of Arabia, 1971), p. 104. 02. Daniel R. Green and William F. Mullen III, *Fallujah Redux: The Anbar Awakening and the Struggle with al-Qaeda*, 2014, pp. 1-157. 03. Daniel R. Green, “The Fallujah Awakening: A Case Study in Counter-Insurgency,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 2010, 21:4, 591-609. 04. Emma Sky, *The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq*, 2015, pp. 1-400; Joel Rayburn, *Iraq after America: Strongmen, Sectarrians, Resistance*, 2014, pp. 1-284. 05. Mat Wolf, “The Tribe That Won’t Stop Killing ISIS,” *The Daily Beast*, October 12, 2015. 06. This quote is from an interview conducted by U.S. Government officials with an Albu Nimr tribal leader in Iraq in 2014-2016. 07. Ibid. 08. AFP, “25 Iraqi fighters killed thwarting Daesh assault – commander,” *The Jordan Times*, January 5, 2016. 09. Loveday Morris, “This town has resisted Islamic State for 18 months. But food is running low,” *The Washington Post*, July 21, 2015.